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Tyler Morning Telegraph

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Voters to consider $167.3M TJC bond

JENNIFER SCOTT

In Saturday's election, Tyler Junior College is asking voters to consider a $167.3 million bond aimed at funding campus improvements, workforce training facility, and student-centered spaces.

If approved, the bond would be the college's first since 2012 and would fund three primary areas: new workforce development buildings, updated student centers, and technology and safety upgrades across campus.

College officials say the improvement is needed to keep the pace with student demand and regional workforce needs. They also noted that Texas community colleges do not receive state funding for major infrastructure projects, making the bond a key source of funding for large-scale improvements.

For homeowners, the proposal would mean an estimated increase of about $7 per month, or $84 annually, on a home valued at $252,000. TJC said this would be the impact for the average homeowner, as $252,141 is the 2025 average taxable value of a homestead within the TJC taxing district.

COMMUNITY VOICES WEIGH IN

Tyler City Council member Petra Hawkins said while students

BOND >> PAGE 5A

Signs are posted along Gentry Parkway in Tyler both in favor and opposition of the TJC bond proposal. (Jennifer Scott/Tyler Morning Telegraph)

Water district orders study

Results will show how much water from Lake O' the Pines can be used during drought

JORDAN GREEN

HUGHES SPRINGS — How much water will be available in Lake O' the Pines if an extreme drought strikes, and how must the cities that depend on it conserve their resources?

The answer to questions like those could be revealed in six months.

The directors of the Northeast Texas Municipal Water District, better known as NETMWD, on Monday hired a Texas-based water engineering firm, Carollo Engineers Inc., to conduct a water availability evaluation of Lake O' the Pines. The study will give water district leaders "the key analyses necessary to make informed decisions on how best to manage their resources efficiently, holistically, and sustainably for both existing and future water needs," according to a letter the firm sent to the water district.

The study will examine the amount of water the lake can legally and physically sell or lease – "divert," in technical terms – under various scenarios, especially droughts. The study

WATER >> PAGE 3A

Children collect clean water from a newly drilled well provided by Amigos Internacionales. As part of the "MissionPoint" initiative, drilling water wells serves as a foundational step in the organization's multi-step process for sustainable community development. Although the group's work reaches across the globe, its headquarters recently returned to East Texas. (Contributed Photo)

Global Impact

Whitehouse nonprofit brings medical care, education to remote communities across the world

JENNIFER SCOTT

WHITEHOUSE — Motivated by a desire to show God's love through practical aid — including food, medical care and sustainable resources — Dr. John La Noue founded Amigos Internacionales in 1967.

"People called him 'Indiana Jones with a Bible and a skillet,'" said Michael Ryer, the organization's president and CEO.

What began as a short-term effort to provide mobile dental and medical clinics in the Rio Grande Valley evolved into an international humanitarian organization focused on addressing poverty, hunger, education, and healthcare access in underserved communities.

Today, the organization's work expands to multiple countries, including Uganda, Burundi, Nigeria, and Belize, where volunteers and partner organizations help provide food aid, medical care, schools, and vocational training programs.

"Wherever there's human need, we try to fill it," Ryer said.

Amigos Internacionales President and CEO Michael Ryer holds a photo of a surgical team in Uganda inside the nonprofit's headquarters in Whitehouse. Ryer explained that in remote areas with limited infrastructure, volunteer doctors often rely on flashlights to perform life-changing procedures. (Jennifer Scott/Tyler Morning Telegraph)

While Amigos Internacionales' work reaches across the globe, its headquarters recently returned to East Texas with a new office location in Whitehouse.

EXPANDING HUMANITARIAN OUTREACH

In addition to emergency relief efforts, Amigos Internacionales has increasingly focused on what Ryer described as sustainable, long-term community development through its "MissionPoint" initiative.

The program begins when a village donates land for development. From there, the organization works through a multi-step process that includes drilling water wells, building schools and churches, creating community gardens and offering vocational training programs.

The organization also teaches practical skills intended to help residents support themselves

AMIGOS >> PAGE 3A

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"Rejoice always."
(1 Thessalonians 5:16)

Weather
High 69 Low 63
Cloudy, a heavy t-storm
See the Tyler-East Texas 3-day forecast on **Page 8A.**

Stocks
DOW -25.86
NASDAQ -223.30

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Water

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will assess the strengths or weaknesses of the lake's drought contingency plan, which prescribes how to conserve the lake's water during a drought, said Dominik Sobieraj, the water district's assistant general manager.

Drought contingency plans are activated when water is being pumped from the lake faster than it is refilling, and entities that draw water from it – cities, power plants and more – are required to curtail their usage at various rates. At Lake O' the Pines, the plan activates when the lake reaches 75% of capacity.

The study will examine decades' worth of data – such as metrics regarding rainfall, drought and lake levels – and compare it with population growth and water usage projections to determine how much water the lake is likely to have available under given scenarios, said Tony Smith, the engineer who will undertake the study.

"If the last 70 years were to occur again, and we assume that the past is a good representation, then we can say how often good times are occurring, how often bad times might occur, what would the conditions look like under bad times," Smith said.

That information will give water district leaders the knowledge they need before proceeding with future water deals, allowing them to decide how much water can be diverted and what kind of drought restrictions need to be in place before deals are struck.

Members of the Northeast Texas Municipal Water District listen during a meeting Monday at the district office in Hughes Springs. (Jordan Green/Longview News-Journal)

The study will arm them with "as good of science as we can," Smith said.

The study is the type typically undertaken as part of large water deals, but the water district is not in talks with another entity at this time, said Osiris Brantley, general manager of the water district.

The study will cost $92,000.

"I think that, once this study is done, concerned citizens ... that have questions about flows and tributaries will get that explanation from experts like (Smith)," Brantley said during Monday's meeting.

The study comes roughly one year after the water district was engulfed in controversy regarding the proposed sale of water rights to the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The deal would have diverted 100,000 acre-feet of water annually.

While water district leaders say they will never entertain the sale of water rights in the future, they will consider future leases of water that could pump revenue into the district and the seven cities that have water rights in Lake O' the Pines.

Texas lawmakers and regional leaders are reckoning with the reality that the state could face a water shortage in the coming years, prompting innumerable policy changes and political battles for water supplies. Water-related issues are expected to be one of the most pressing issues for state lawmakers in the 2027 legislative session.

Northeast Texas has the most plentiful water supplies in the state, making it a target for the ever-growing thirst of water planners in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

The study will examine various scenarios at the lake regarding water supply and demand. For example, it'll analyze what the lake level would be if each of its present-day customers pumped all of the water they legally can, which none of those customers have ever done, Sobieraj said.

Lake O' the Pines is a source for Longview and six of the seven East Texas cities that have seats on its board of directors. Longview has a contract to use 20,000 acre-feet of water annually but uses only 4,000, Sobieraj said. During the 2011 drought of record, the city used 5,000 acre-feet.

"[The study] will show how much water can safely be diverted from Lake O' the Pines for whatever purpose it is in order not to trigger [the drought plan]," Sobieraj said. "We want to see and show everybody what is truly there."

Lake O' the Pines' state-issued water permit allows the water district to divert 203,800 acre-feet of water per year. An acre-foot of water would cover a football field in one foot of water.

Presently, about 9,000 acre-feet of water are diverted from the lake per year, roughly 5% of what the lake legally can divert, Sobieraj said.

Lake O' the Pines hasn't activated its drought contingency plan since it was created, even during the 2011 drought, when the lake reached its lowest recorded level, Sobieraj said.

Most years, Lake O' the Pines has an overabundance of water. From 2020 through 2025, it released an average of 495,466 acre-feet of water downstream each year – more than two times the amount of water the lake is permitted to divert.

Almost all of the water released downstream came from the lake's flood pool, which is over and above the 203,800 acre-feet in the lake's conservation pool, which is the water the lake can divert.

Even if the lake is not in flood-pool stage, the 203,800 acre-feet can be diverted without harming the environment, Sobieraj said.

The study will be beneficial to the district and the region, he added.

"We will all be smarter because of it," Sobieraj said.

Smith said the study will be useful for future water planning needs. Future population growth projections could be used to model scenarios for water supply and demand.

He said the study will look at what the lake has the legal and physical right to divert, but his study's focus is not on environmental impact.

"We can look at what's accessible, the reliability and availability of those rights today, and paint that picture along with all the various contracts that are in place for water," Smith said.

Amigos

From Page 1A

financially, including sewing, soap making, carpentry and masonry work.

"We're trying to teach them to be better than themselves," Ryer said. "I'm not trying to help them today or tomorrow. We want generational change."

Ryer said the organization has also responded to humanitarian crises over the years, including disaster relief efforts and food distribution projects.

Since 2002, the nonprofit has distributed millions of meals in Guatemala through partnerships that include support from USAID. The organization also provided aid following volcanic disasters in the region by supplying emergency food to displaced residents.

MEDICAL OUTREACH

In recent years, the organization has expanded its medical outreach efforts in East Africa through a partnership with Doctors on Mission in Uganda.

Ryer said the medical teams travel into remote areas where residents often have little to no access to healthcare.

"We are literally going into the bush and doing medical clinics and medical camps," Ryer said. "We're doing surgeries such as dental, we're doing eye cataracts. We're turning our schoolrooms into surgical centers."

In some regions where the organization operates, those school buildings are the only available structures large enough to support medical activity. Ryer said procedures are carried out with limited equipment and lighting, with doctors at times relying on flashlights to perform treatments that would normally take place in fully equipped hospitals.

During one recent children's surgical camp, Ryer said teams completed 36 cleft palate surgeries in three days.

"You may not know how to help the child in Uganda that has a cleft palate," he said. "... but through Amigos, I can show you and give you the opportunity to literally make a change in that child's life."

The organization is also preparing for additional surgical outreach efforts in northeastern Uganda, where Ryer said hundreds of children have been identified as needing procedures.

EDUCATION AND ANTI-TRAFFICKING EFFORTS

Education initiatives have become another major focus for the organization after leaders in Uganda described how children who could not afford school fees were often forced out of school.

Ryer said many vulnerable children, particularly girls, become targets for exploitation after being sent home from school.

"They're so desperate to get money anyway, so they can get back to school, they'll sell themselves and men in the village know this so they take advantage," Ryer said. "But that's how we got into this... I've wanted to fight sex trafficking, and that was how we were doing it."

The organization has been working to support more than a thousand students across several schools in Uganda.

"If they're in school," they're not being sex trafficked," Ryer said.

The schools are also being provided meals and creating connections between donors and students through sponsorship programs and regular updates.

DIFFERENT SETTINGS, DIFFERENT NEEDS

Ryer said the organization's focus on international work comes down to access and scale of need. While he acknowledged there are individuals and communities in need in the United States, he said many people still have relatively more pathways to care compared to those in remote regions overseas.

"There is so much opportunity for anybody here that really wants to get care, to get care," he said. "There is not anyone here that would walk 100 kilometers to get to medical help... like it's done in these underserved communities."

He added that Amigos Internacionales has supported local efforts as well, including donating medical equipment to Bethesda Health Clinic in East Texas years ago and working with regional partners on trauma and mental health-related services.

Still, he said the scale of need in parts of Africa and other regions, combined with limited infrastructure, is what drives much of the organization's international focus.

"There is need here," he said. "But there is so much opportunity over there where there's just no access."

CONTINUING THE MISSION

Ryer has been involved with Amigos Internacionales since childhood, first becoming connected to the organization through its founder, Dr. John La Noue, in the late 1960s.

He later served in a variety of volunteer and leadership roles before being named president and CEO about 16 years ago, stepping into the organization's top position after decades of involvement in both ministry and nonprofit work.

"I spent 47 years helping people," he said. "Now I help people help people."

The organization's medical outreach relies heavily on volunteer doctors and medical professionals, most of whom are based in Uganda or other parts of East Africa, with additional volunteers traveling in from other countries. Participants often donate their time and, in many cases, cover their own travel and time away from work, while the organization provides lodging and meals during medical camps.

The nonprofit reported spending about $185,000 in a recent year while estimating approximately $10 million in medical services delivered, a figure it described as roughly $55 in medical value for every $1 contributed.

"You can see the difference in a literally changed life," Ryer said.

Amigos Internacionales operates primarily through donations from individuals, churches, and foundations. According to Ryer, while some churches contribute through missions budgets, others support the organization through smaller recurring donations.

"I've got a little church of retired women," he said. "They're just barely surviving and they send me $100 every three months. That check means more than the $10,000 check because I know it's the widow's mite."

RETURNING TO EAST TEXAS

After relocating to the Tyler area to be closer to family, Ryer and his wife helped establish Amigos Internacionales's headquarters in Whitehouse. Inside the office — located at 15632 Hwy 110 South, Suite 18 — is lined with photographs of the organization's overseas work, from rebuilt school buildings in rural communities to before-and-after images of children following cleft palate surgeries.

"I want people to be able to come and see the work that we're doing here," Ryer said.

At 66 years old, Ryer said he still looks forward to coming into the office each day.

"I get image after image after image of people whose lives are being touched and changed," he said. "It's not hard to get excited about coming to work."

To find out more about volunteer opportunities or how to support Amigos Internacionales, visit www.amigosil.org.